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## CITIZENS VS. ELITES. SYMBOLIC BATTLES OVER THE USES OF POLITICAL CRISES IN BULGARIA

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**Abstract.** How does one write about civic activism in a time of no activism, of fatigue, political impasse, and crisis after crisis? What has become most constant is the exceptional: crisis. It is to the latter that this essay is devoted. It addresses the question: How do elites and citizens address, use or lose political crises? The conceptual cluster of the analysis is built on the triad national populism, post-democracy, and crisis.

*Keywords:* elites; citizens; crisis; national populism

The author's understanding of national populism is built on the three pillars of nativism, authoritarianism defined by C. Mudde and C. R. Kaltwasser (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2013, p. 497). I offer another interpretation and argue that the Bulgarian national populism could be better understood via another triad: identitarianism, post-secularism, and statism. The identitarian pole concentrates the overproduction of Othering and expresses its politics of fear. Religionization of politics is a fundamental post-communist trend of the political instrumentalization of religion. Bringing the State back into politics and revitalizing it against neoliberal weakening is the core of the third pole, statism and the politics of sovereignty. It takes the paradoxical form of an "international nationalism," of Bulgarian nationalism closely tied to Russia. The people – the sine qua non of any national-populism – is at the centre of the three-pole map. Radical demophilia is defined and defended through radical anti-elitism (Krasteva 2016, pp. 180 – 181). Post-democracy is conceptualized in the spirit of Colin Crouch (Crouch 2004) as a state and process in which the democratic institutions continue to exist but increasingly turn into a hollow shell as the engine of development and change shifts away from them and the democratic agora and towards narrow, non-transparent private economic-political circles. The post-democratic party is like a firm: activists are replaced by lobbyists and campaigns by capital (Crouch 2004). The crisis is conceptualized in next part.

The essay is structured in three parts. The first part outlines the conceptual history of crisis from 'the end of history' to a mega metaphor of contemporary

society. The second part examines four crises in Bulgaria. The conclusion maps the crises along the axes of democracy/post-democracy and civic activism/national populist mobilisations.

The choice of crises was indeed difficult – how to choose the most significant ones among the huge variety and number of crises? Three criteria determined the selection: being emblematic and marking key transitions and trends in the Bulgaria's thirty-year post-communist period; being of different types; and showing different constellations of elites and citizens as winners or losers of the crises.

Four crises are at the center of the present analysis:

- 1997: economic bankruptcy of the state by the post-communist communist elites;
- 2015 – 2016: migration “crisis” caused by geopolitical factors but successfully instrumentalised by the national populist elites;
- 2020: post-democratic crisis of state capture by oligarchic elites;
- 2021 – 2023: political crisis of an “avalanche” of snap elections and inability to form a regular government.

### **Crisis – from the ‘end of history’ to mega metaphor of contemporary society**

Crisis – both as a concept and as a reality – has an extraordinary history. It arose in ancient times and remained a marginal concept for a long time, until it became a mega-metaphor of the 21st century today. I will summarize this story in a few steps.

*From a marginal concept to a ‘signature of modernity’.* The concept of crisis developed in waves: periods of marginalization were followed by periods of active theorization. There is a close connection between crisis and socio-political change: radical transformations such as the great bourgeois revolutions were conceived by the authors of the era as crises. Nowadays, crisis has been assigned a central place in the conceptual arsenal by which the contemporary world is conceived. “The term ‘crisis’ was in only marginal use until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when it rose to prominence, ‘a structural signature of modernity’ (Reinhart Koselleck in Schulz 2017, p. 10).

*From end of history to state of crisis.* The 20<sup>th</sup> century ended with a radical non-crisis discourse: Francis Fukuyama's “end of history” expresses the triumph of democracy and globalization, their victory over aberrations like communism, the advancement of politics and society towards a shared horizon. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has replaced Fukuyama's triumphant optimism with Zygmunt Bauman's “state of crisis” (Bauman & Bordon 2004) as a mega-metaphor for contemporary society.

*From dark to bright interpretations, or the crisis as Janus.* Few other concepts are like Janus – with two theoretical faces. One theoretical face is dark, grey and pessimistic, the other opposite one positive, creative and optimistic. The first discourse mobilizes the political arsenal of crisis management, prevention, governance. The second interpretation advances Nietzsche's idea that every crisis

contains a moment of truth which allows us to see, in a magnified and deformed form, the deep essence of the phenomenon in crisis as well as both its weaknesses and its unsuspected opportunities. This vision presents the crisis as a new beginning, the opportunity for post-crisis change not as restoration of the pre-crisis status quo but as innovative experimentation of new solutions: “[C]risis’ ... expresses something positive, creative and optimistic, because it involves a change, and may be a rebirth after a break-up.” (Bauman & Bordoní 2004, p. 3).

Three phrases affirming crisis as a mega-narrative of contemporary world are key to this analysis:

- *Crisis as a cultural malaise* of “loss of faith in historicism and evolutionism, in the inevitability of progress” (Holton 1987, p. 506).

- *Crisis as social critique*: crisis is a powerful and dramatic metaphor for defining and rejecting social pathologies, for “the refusal to accept all features of social life as necessarily ‘given’ and ‘unproblematic’” (Holton 1987, p. 505).

- *Crisis as the new way of life*: “We must learn to live with the crisis, just as we are resigned to living with so much endemic adversity imposed on us by the evolution of the times: pollution, noise, corruption and, above all, fear” (Bauman & Bordoní 2004, p. 7).

### **Post-communist bankruptcy of the state by post-communist communist elites: citizens and reformist elites for a transformative change**

“Post-communist communist elites” is an oxymoron, but it is relevant to the paradoxes of the [Bulgaria’s] long and non-linear democratic transition. The post-communist elites were elected in pluralist elections. But just as the communist elites wrecked the economy and the state, so too have the post-communist communist elites, who came back to power, bankrupted the economy and the state.

The year is 1997. Inflation has reached a staggering hike of 300%, the average wage has plummeted to 5 USD a month, families that have saved for a decade for an apartment can only buy a fridge, and the link between past and future has been brutally severed, leaving a bleak and dismal present of total crisis. At the opposite pole, the so-called credit millionaires, who had gotten rich from the millions uncontrollably handed out by the banks, further benefit from the crisis, which has melted their debts away. Fifteen banks have gone bust. A “grain crisis” has broken out: more grain is exported and sold than the amount needed to produce bread in the country. Bulgaria has descended into economic collapse, the crisis is multifaceted: economic, financial, grain, and political. The opposition declares a national political strike, calls for civil disobedience, and organises a protest march on the National Assembly. Angry citizens stormed Bulgaria’s Parliament on 10 January 1997.

Citizens and reformist elites walked hand-in-hand – in the literal sense – at the thousands-strong protest marches headed by the leaders of the opposition United

Democratic Forces (ODS) and in the long-term political sense of the common goal of resolving the crisis, ending the post-communist period, and firmly setting Bulgaria on a democratic path. The electoral expression of this unity was explicit and unequivocal: in the early parliamentary elections on 19 April 1997, the United Democratic Forces won an absolute majority of 52.26%.

This crisis marked the end of the post-communist transition. Two indicators reveal the depth of the change: the beginning of the Bulgarian Socialist Party's decay, and Bulgaria's European path and its support by the majority of citizens. After bankrupting the economy and the state, the BSP started the path to decline and today has single-digit support. Bulgaria embarked on a democratic path from which neither populism nor post-democracy have been able to significantly divert it so far.

In the deep, multifaceted crisis of 1997, citizens and reformist elites united in a coalition for transformative change.

### **Migration crisis: Identity politics or the winner takes all**

The years are 2015 – 2016. Bulgaria, like the Western Balkans and European countries, is in the throes of a migrant crisis, with refugee flows increasing tenfold. Then, as now, Bulgaria is a transit destination; there is no significant increase in integration-related challenges, and the percentage of migrants remains insignificant – around 2% of the population. Despite the insignificant percentage of migrants, the migrant crisis marks a key victory for populist elites. The actors change – while some leaders and parties depart from the political scene, new ones appear – but populism, firstly, has become “Europeanised”, and secondly, it continues to have a lasting and strong impact on the larger mainstream parties.

Bulgarian populism is a paradoxical phenomenon: it was not a major player during the most fragile democracy of the post-communist transition. It emerged relatively late, in 2005, but stormed its way into both the political and parliamentary scene with the party with the telling name *Ataka* (Attack). Today, both *Ataka* and its leader have long since become part of Bulgaria's turbulent post-communist history, but populism continues to be part of the country's political present with the new party in electoral ascendancy, *Vazrazhdane* (Revival). The initial target of Bulgarian populism was the Roma, who were rapidly criminalised and marginalised. This target continues to mobilise fans and voters to this day, but the migrant crisis was a turning point in redesigning Bulgarian populism, at which migrants were assigned a central place in the arsenal of haters. I summarise this transition with the paradox, “If migrant crises did not exist, they would have been invented by populist elites”.

Bulgaria's populist elites embraced the migration ‘crisis’ and successfully achieved several results. The first is “Europeanisation” – they have naturally continued to fervently attack Brussels, but they have gotten closer to European populists, whose central targets are migrants. The second change is the continuous production of

populist migrant crises, even in periods of small migration flows; election campaigns are opened in a small town with a refugee centre, a Catholic priest who sheltered a Syrian refugee family is forced to leave the country; anti-refugee mobilisations are simulated with a few local nationalists and more vocal haters brought in from elsewhere. The third change is the most significant: the political influence of populism has substantially exceeded its electoral weight, which remains below 15% for now. The mainstreaming of populism is omnipresent: identity politics is promoted, the Bordering/Othering/Ordering triad (Houtum & Naerssen 2002) is generalised – that is, there is an overproduction of ethnic, religious, and symbolic boundaries and differences as well as the message “There is a place for everyone, but everyone should know their place”. Mainstream parties such as the BSP have fully accepted this political rhetoric other parties do not offer alternative discourses.

Populist elites are the winners in the symbolic uses of the migrant crisis (later, of the pandemic) and have assumed the self-complacent role of “winner takes all”.

Where, in this political scene dominated by mainstream populism, are the citizens? At the very beginning of the migrant crisis, they managed to mobilise for humanitarian action. This activism quickly waned, civic activists for rights and solidarity were turned into yet another populist target and declared national traitors and foreign agents.

### ***Occupy Bulgaria against oligarchisation and state capture***

Summer 2020. Prosecutors raid the President’s Office with armed police officers to arrest a presidential advisor (who will later be acquitted). The force demonstrated is completely inconsistent with the purpose of the operation and the total unlikelihood that the suspected senior government official might resist arrest in the well-guarded building. The citizenry erupts in indignation and gathers in large numbers in the square in front of the President’s Office. Not to defend the President himself, who deftly tries to ride the wave of civil discontent, but the institution and institutional order itself.

The protests went beyond the mere resignation of the Prosecutor General and demanded a fundamental reform: the convocation of a Grand National Assembly to amend the Constitution regarding the judiciary. The reform of the judiciary should even precede the political transformation. As a protestor pointed out: “It doesn’t matter who rules if there is no independent prosecutor’s office to work for the rights of the people, not the oligarchs and the mafia” (Krasteva 2020).

The protests aimed at political transformation, not only resignation. The protesting citizens and the multitude who supported them were fighting against oligarchisation, endemic corruption, and state capture. “Systemic change, not replacement”, demanded another protestor. A protester summarised the “total” protest for radical transformation: “against the violation of law, against the authoritarian, pseudo-

democratic power linked to the mafia, against the politicisation of all spheres of life, against the status quo, and against conformity with the status quo, which cries ‘everyone is a bad guy, what to do?’”

The protests did not immediately achieve their specific goals – the resignations of Prime Minister Boyko Borissov and General Prosecutor Ivan Geshev – but they achieved two significant political results:

- They catalysed the creation of the party We Continue the Change<sup>1</sup> as a party actor to fight post-democratic state capture.

- They consolidated the culture of civic activism and contestatory citizenship as grassroots mobilisations against political crises and for holding elites accountable.

### **From crisis to crisis – hopeless citizens, happy elites**

From elections to elections, political impasse, and the political impotence of the parliamentary elites unable to form a government and to transform election results into governance is the summary of the last crisis period. For the short period of

4 years from April 4, 2021 to November 2024, citizens are sent to the polls to vote for 8 elections – 7 snap parliamentary elections and 1 presidential election. We are also setting a world record – 3 votes in just one year – 2021. From the point of view of party history, the period is extremely interesting – a new protest populist party ‘There is such a people’ emerged, which in a matter of months became a leading political force, only to fall out of one National Assembly but managed to re-enter the next ones. Anti-system parties are pouring in like torrential rain like ‘Grandeur’ (Velichie) and ‘SWORD’ (Morality, Unity, Honor) and are marking the same meteoric rise. No less dramatic is the recent history of ‘We Continue the Change’, which was elected on the promise of radically fighting state capture: it managed to form a government but ruled the country for just six months between December 2021 and June 2022 and is losing the support of the disenchanted voters. The GERB (‘Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria’) party, the personification of the status quo and state capture that was the target of the 2020 protests, lost some elections but managed to take the lead once again in the last elections. At the time of finalizing the essay, Parliament is once again in limbo, and it is not clear whether it will succeed in electing a government or whether the country will go to the polls again soon.

The rise and fall of parties in record time will long be analysed in political science publications. For the present analysis, the key question is: who is winning the symbolic battle for the use of this parliamentary, constitutional, and governance crisis? The key paradox is that those who are benefiting from this crisis, which has been entirely and solely created by the political elites, are precisely the political elites. Citizens are overwhelmed and exhausted by constant elections; there is no energy for activism or mobilising causes.

The biggest winner is the most controversial figure of the Bulgarian elite – Delyan Peevski, sanctioned for corruption by the US and the UK. He makes the impossible possible – split the MRF and arrogantly appropriates elections, a building for his new party, budget funds allocated by the caretaker government of D. Glavchev precisely for the municipalities that voted for D. Peevski.

The other big winner is President Rumen Radev. The parliamentary crisis strengthened the power of the president, who – before the constitutional changes – ruled with caretaker governments without the control of Parliament and used this enormous power to try to reorient the geopolitical Euro-Atlantic orientation of Bulgaria. Changes to the Constitution temporarily halted this trend, but pressure to restore the president's powers is growing. The president is also enjoying the symbolic capital of the only stable institution in a situation of crises of all the other institutions – Parliament, political parties, Supreme Judicial Council with expired mandate.

The other winners are the bearers of national populism and post-democracy. The far-right ‘Renaissance’ (Vazrazhdane) is gaining political capital from its anti-establishment rhetoric against all other elites, who fully deserve such criticism, though not from leaders who are aggravating the crisis. Boyko Borissov, the longest-serving post-communist leader, is using the crisis very shrewdly to make public opinion forget both his personal and party responsibility for state capture, and Bulgaria’s persistent place as the poorest and most corrupt country in the EU. Citizens’ natural desire for stability is being used to make public opinion accept the return to power of those responsible for Bulgaria’s post-democratic oligarchisation.

### **Winners and losers in the symbolic battles to dominate the political crises**

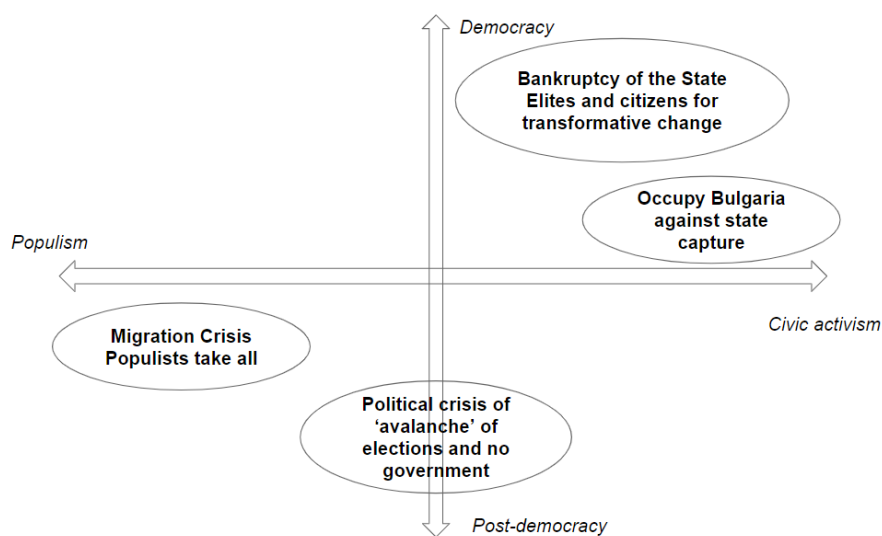
The crises are permanent; what has been changed are the actors benefiting from the symbolic battles between elites and citizens for their domination.

The financial and political crisis of 1997 is the only one that reformist elites and citizens together managed to turn into transformative change so as to break with the communist past and firmly embark on the path of Euro-Atlantic integration. The migrant crisis of 2015 – 2016 consolidated the populist parties’ symbolic power, which substantially exceeds their electoral results and their ability to frame and lead public debates on identity politics. The protests of 2020 expressed the maturity of civic activism as a continuation of green and mass mobilisations, the citizens’ ability to stand up against Bulgaria’s oligarchisation and state capture. The 2021 – 2023 political crisis of an “avalanche” of elections created by the elites unable to form a government has been virtuously used by themselves in their own benefit to whitewash their image from purveyor of corruption to guarantor of stability.

**Table 1.** Actors and outcomes of the crises

| Period      | Type of crisis                                                        | Winner/s of the symbolic battle for the crisis | Outcomes                                                                                                               |
|-------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1997        | Multifaceted crisis – financial, grain, economic and political crisis | Citizens and reformist elites                  | Transformative change<br>Firm Euro-Atlantic orientation                                                                |
| 2015–2016   | Migrant crisis                                                        | Populist elites                                | Mainstreaming of populism<br>Deepening of Bordering/Othering/Ordering<br>Human rights activists – from friends to foes |
| 2020        | Occupy Bulgaria<br>Protests against state capture                     | Contestatory citizens                          | Party of the protest                                                                                                   |
| 2021 – 2023 | Snap elections after snap elections                                   | Elites of status quo                           | Return of elites responsible for state capture<br>Immobilisation of citizens<br>Rise and fall of new elites            |

The following diagram maps the crises along two axes: democracy/post-democracy, and civic activism/populism



**Figure 1.** Crises between democracy and post-democracy, civic activism and national populism

Elites and citizens for transformative change, as well as *Occupy Bulgaria* against state capture, are located in the field framed by democracy and civic activism. The national populist instrumentalisation of the migration crisis is in the field between post-democracy and populist mobilisations. The political crisis of an “avalanche” of elections and governance without a regular government, signifying the return of the status-quo elite responsible for state capture, is located along the axis of deepening post-democratic trends.

### **Concluding remarks**

Politically, Bulgaria exists in what Z. Bauman describes as a state of crisis, characterized by permanent instability, the impotence of elites, and ungovernability. This is one of the expressions of post-democracy. The latter is the latest stage of post-communist transformations which started with democratization before shifting to mainstreamed national populism and currently to post-democracy. While retaining the outward forms of democratic institutions, post-democracy undermines their purpose of serving the public good and prosperity, instead catering to a shrinking circle of oligarchic interests. Bulgaria is increasingly trapped in a vicious cycle, where extractive political institutions create and reinforce extractive economic institutions which lead to state capture and failing nations – a phenomenon brilliantly analyzed in *Why Nations Fail* by the 2024 Nobel prize winners Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (Acemoglu & Robinson 2013).

The analysis of four emblematic crises in Bulgaria and the symbolic battles of elites and citizens for their symbolic domination shows a lack of linearity. Reformist elites have managed in some cases to transform the crisis into a catalyst for positive changes, but in recent years the winners have turned out to be populist and post-democratic elites. The citizenry is weary of the political impasse, the contestatory agency is demoralized, but still has a potential for resistance against the threats to democratization.

### **NOTES**

1. The analysis of the developments of the party We Continue the Change is beyond the scope of this essay.

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